Massachusetts Rabies Immunization Program for Dogs, Cats, and Ferrets

Since the arrival of raccoon rabies in Massachusetts in 1992, animal rabies has been reported by cities and towns across the state. Since 1999 the number of positive cases has been relatively stable at an average of 272 cases per year, with a small increase noted in 2002. Because of the constant presence of rabies in raccoons, bats, and other wild animals in Massachusetts, the Department of Public Health considers regulations requiring vaccinating dogs, cats, and ferrets to be essential to protect domestic animals and the public's health.

Chapter 141, Section 145B of the Massachusetts General Laws and 105 Code of Massachusetts (CMR) 330 require that all dogs and cats in Massachusetts be vaccinated against rabies. Provisions of the law include vaccination of all dogs and cats by six months of age, use of a USDA-licensed rabies vaccine, use of a uniform rabies vaccination certificate, National Association of State Public Health Veterinarians (NASPHV) form #51, and a rabies tag provided by the vaccinating veterinarian. Computer-generated vaccination certificates are sufficient, provided they contain the same information required in the NASPHV form #51.

According to 105 CMR 330, vaccination certificates for dogs must be filed by the vaccinating veterinarian within 30 days with the clerk of the city or town where the dog owner resides. One copy shall be provided to the dog owner, and one copy shall be retained by the vaccinating veterinarian. According to 105 CMR 330, dogs must wear rabies tags at all times. Cats are not required to wear their rabies tags, however, cat owners must have the tag available for inspection by authorized persons.

Under 321 CMR 2.07 (Massachusetts Division of Fisheries and Wildlife), ferrets kept as pets must also be vaccinated against rabies at an age determined by the vaccine manufacturer's instructions for the particular vaccine. Presently, only one rabies vaccine has current USDA approval for ferrets, and this vaccine is recommended at three months of age and then annually.

If you have questions, contact the Bureau of Animal Health in the Department of Food and Agriculture at 617- 626- 1794.

August 2003